

KENNETH HUDSPETH'S AMAZING STORY

by
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Lieutenant Kenneth Hudspeth DSC RANVR

Kenneth (Ken) was born in Echua Victoria, 31st March 1918. Parents were Robert and Ada. He arrived in Tasmania with his parents in the following year, 1919. He joined the Sea Scouts (1st Derwent Scout Group) and after completing his school became a trainee teacher and was assigned to the rather remote school of Hythe area school at South Port.

Following the outbreak of war Ken Hudspeth applied to join the Navy and was appointed as a probationary Sub Lieutenant, RANVR on 15 July 1940. His first posting was to HMAS *Cerberus* for induction training followed by training at HMAS *Rushcutter* for anti-submarine warfare duties. During his time at *Rushcutter* he completed sea training in the former survey vessel HMAS *Moresby*.

Hudspeth departed Australia in the MV *Imperial Star* in late January 1941. On arrival in the United Kingdom in late March, he served briefly in the Flower Class corvette HMS *Clarkia* before being appointed to the corvette HMS *Anemone*. He and served in her for the next 18 months on convoy escort duties in the North Atlantic.

In mid-1942 volunteers for special and hazardous service were called for, stating they must be "*below 24 years of age on selection, unmarried, be good swimmers and of strong and enduring physique*".

After volunteering and following a selection interview at HMS *Dolphin*, Hudspeth was accepted without an explanation of what the "hazardous service" actually was. He was then posted to HMS *Varbel* on the Isle of Bute, where he commenced training in the new British midget submarines known as X-Craft. He was promoted Lieutenant on 15 January 1943 and was appointed Commanding Officer of HMS *X-10*.

The first major employment of the X-Craft was Operation SOURCE involving attacks on the German warships *Tirpitz*, *Scharnhorst* and *Lutzow*, then operating from northern Norwegian fjords. These warships posed a major threat to Allied convoys transiting to and from Russia. Hudspeth commanded *X-10* during the attack on 22 September 1943 on the *Tirpitz* in Kaa Fjord. Others with him were Sub-lieutenant Bruce Enzer, Sub-lieutenant Geoff Harding (diver and the youngest, 19 years of age) and E.R.A. Tilley, a regular from the large submarines.

The X-Craft, with a crew of four per vessel, were towed across the North Sea by British submarines before being released to enter the fjords submerged. The crew would then manoeuvre the craft underneath the enemy vessel where the 'side cargo' of high explosive charges would be jettisoned. A delayed activation fuse would then give the crew time to escape before the charges exploded and the resulting overpressure would damage or sink the ship.

The attack was a partial success with *Tirpitz* badly damaged by the charges laid by *X-6* and *X-7*, but both mini subs were attacked and sunk with two of the crew of *X-7* killed and the other six men taken prisoner.

X-5 was also sunk by German forces in Kaa Fjord during the attack. *X-8* was to attack *Lutzow* in Alten Fjord but the explosive charges began to take on water and on being jettisoned one prematurely exploded, damaging the submarine and forcing her crew to scuttle the vessel. *X-9* and *X-10* were to attack *Scharnhorst* in Kaa Fjord, however *X-9* sank en route while under tow across the North Sea. Hudspeth pushed on with the attack and took *X-10* into the fjord not knowing that *Scharnhorst* had shifted berth and was now in Alten Fjord.

The log notes 2320 hours, "On our way up Altenfyord one of the side-cargoes flooded".

Kenneth asked every one whether they wanted to go in and do the attack to which they all replied, "Yes".

When within four miles of the target location, although *Scharnhorst* was no longer there, the periscope motor burned out and filled the submarine with fumes. Following this the gyro compass failed as did the magnetic compass light. Then the boat started to leak and *X-10's* switchboard blew all its fuses. Finally one of the two side cargo explosive saddles began to leak as well. Hudspeth put *X-10* on the sea floor to attempt repairs. When all repair efforts failed he was forced to abandon the attack and at 1800 hours, Hudspeth decided to call it off. It was a great disappointment.

X-10 had been submerged in the fjord for nearly 24 hours and the air in the submarine was now almost unbreathable. Reluctantly, Hudspeth took *X-10* out of the fjord to rendezvous with HMS *Sceptre*.

On the return voyage they planned to head for Iceland or Russia if they made no contact with a submarine. They laid motionless on the surface knowing it would be a dangerous and difficult journey. Fortunately for them they spotted HMAS *Stubborn* which was out searching for them. Getting aboard, however, proved to be a major problem as large waves threw them and their sub about almost to the point that they

could mash against the rocks of a fjord. Finally they manage to board and X-10 was rigged to be towed back towards Lerwick, which was to be a very slow return journey. A gale was blowing making the seas very choppy. The decision was made to scuttle the mini sub. Before doing so, Hudspeth and crew had to board her and remove essential items.

The decision to scuttle her was very hard on the crew, but while doing so, with humour, sang "Three men in a boat".

At Lerwick, they boarded a submarine and sailed down from the Shetlands to Rothesay and then into Port Bannatyne. From there they were put aboard the *Bonaventure*, where they received an incredible reception. Not all was happy. The ship's officer, viewing their appearance of full unkempt beards, unwashed and in battle dress, complained. Once on land, however, they received further acclaim.

Despite failing to reach his target, Lieutenant Hudspeth was awarded a Distinguished Service Cross (DSC) "*for outstanding courage and devotion to duty.*" (London Gazette, 11 January 1944).

The Lord Commissioners of the Admiralty, Admiral Barry wrote:

"The Commanding Officer (referring to Hudspeth) expresses the highest opinion of all his crew throughout the whole of the time they were on board. They worked long and arduously in the face of ever-growing disappointment and at no time did their zeal or enthusiasm fail. I consider that he Commanding Officer himself (Hudspeth) showed determination and high qualities of leadership in a gallant attempt to reach his objective. He was frustrated by defects for which he was in no way responsible and which he made very endeavour to overcome. He showed good judgement in coming to his decision to abandon the attack, thereby bringing back valuable information."

A British film from the 1950s starring Sir John Mills called Sinking of the *Tirpitz* was made. The *Tirpitz* was actually bigger and more powerful than her elder and better known sister ship, the *Bismark*.

Later there was the D-Day landing at Normandy, France June 6th 1944 with which Kenneth was also involved.

Lieutenant Ken Hudspeth was one of the few who manned two three-man mini submarines at Normandy.

Two submarines, X.20 and X.23 were sent in prior to scan out the environment for the landing and wire back to base, conditions at Normandy and to observe the actual invasion.

Few would know that a Tasmanian played such an important part in the success of the allied invasion. Hudspeth was in charge of mini submarine X.20

The submarines set sail on 2nd June four days before the invasion. Named *Operation Gambit*, they had dived sixty four hours out of the seventy six hours they spent at sea.

Their role was to sit it out to the allotted time off Juno Beach. They would check their position by periscope every evening. They were informed that the invasion was on or not came through a coded message from the BBC. What they received was a message stating the invasion was postponed for 24 hours. This meant of course they had to spend another day on the sea floor, anchored. A part of their role was to surface at 4:30 am and provide a navigational beacon, using an echo sounder, to guide minesweepers and then a radio beacon and lights flashing seaward to the guide the assault force.

With the invasion on it completed their mission and they headed back to England, sailing on the surface they witnessed the huge invasion force, cheered and waved by X-20 the ones who they had guided to their destination.



X-Class mini submarine

Hudspeth was awarded a second bar to his DSO. Hudspeth then had the responsibility to train submarine crew.

This was actually his second mission to Normandy. The first was one of reconnaissance as the mini sub carried a commando. During the night the commando swam ashore with the operation coded Omaha. It is said Hudspeth showed “an undeniable air of strength.” For this effort he was awarded the first bar to his DSO.

Lieutenant Hudspeth survived the war. In September 1945 he left England on the passenger liner *SS Aquintania* and arrived to Tasmania in December the same year. He was to live at Rose Bay. He had received the DSC (Distinguished Service Medal) with two bars

Perhaps at this time, it is very apt to remember this hero of Tasmania. He was of course with the British Navy and is mentioned in the 1953 book, 'Above Us the Waves'."

Kenneth returned to teaching and had three sons. He was the first Principle of the Rose Bay High School. He served with the RAN reserves between 31 December 1951 until 21 January 1965.

He retired in 1979 and died in Hobart 3rd December 2000. He was 82.



Ken second from left standing. Picture from the book *Above Us the Waves*.

Those who knew Kenneth state that he was very distinguished looking and used his naval training as an example of discipline for his students. It would seem that he was very well liked and rarely spoke about his war record. He was a keen bushwalker and became involved with the Maritime Museum, Hobart.

Wife, Audrey (nee Nicholson) born in England, was an identity in her own right. She was a founding member of the Lindisfarne Historic Society and authored work on Tasmanian history. She was a social worker being very involved with mental health.

They had three sons, Andrew, David and Donald.

Some 500 Australians served with the Royal Navy during the war.

An article on the episode of the Normandy adventure is found in the magazine WARTIME Winter 2019



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